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## Competition? Or Cooperation?

"Competition," and especially "international competitiveness" have emerged as universal buzzwords over the last few years. The multinationalization of production and the rapid expansion of international trade have been interpreted as signs of growing interdependence and are commonly interpreted as accentuations of "competition" among producers and merchants within the global economy -- a growing competition that calls for radical changes in industrial and economic policy. But what is the nature of this "competition" which is constantly evoked to justify all sorts of industrial reorganizations and policy shifts? The term has been around so long, and has become so commonplace as to be taken for granted. Yet, it has become a euphemism for realities which need to be brought into the open, not hidden away behind a word that means more than it seems.

Historically, there has been a *de facto* consensus about the meaning of "competition" which has embraced the whole political spectrum. Competition has always been seen on the Left as in the Center and on the Right as that relation between firms that fuels capitalist development. For the Center and the Right competition has been celebrated since the time of Adam Smith as the natural dynamic of the economic freedom they associate with individual initiative and entrepreneurship -- and thus as a fundamental paradigm for all social relations. Competition is the core of the "invisible hand" of the market which guarantees maximized social welfare through an ascetically pleasing automatic mechanism. Failures in this mechanism, such as monopoly, can be dealt with by governmental regulation.

For the Left, that automatic mechanism has also been seen as central to capitalist growth but has been condemned as wasteful and anarchic because it also produces crisis and recession. Thus the complaint of the socially destructive "anarchy" of capitalism and the call for planning and the regulation of investment. Unfortunately, both of these points of view obfuscate the real social meaning of competition by focusing all their attention on the actions of business, whether in its corporate or individual guise, and by leaving out of account the hidden relationships between capital and labor that lurk beneath the surface of interfirm relations.

For at the heart of the competition between firms lies other, deeper antagonisms which need to be terminated rather than regulated: that between capital and labor and that among workers which is promulgated by capital to achieve and maintain its control over them all. In mainstream bourgeois economics, competition has always meant, first and foremost, price competition.

In neoclassical microeconomics where the theory has been most rigorously worked out, price competition depends on relative costs. The firm which can lower its costs below the industry average can undersell its competitors and expand both profits and market share. But what is the key to lowering costs? Control over labor. Not just in the straightforward sense that a cut in wages or benefits can lower average and marginal cost, but in more complicated ways as well. Changes in work rules or the introduction of new production technologies which raise productivity and reduce costs also require control over labor to achieve these changes. The capitalist with the best control achieves the biggest cost reductions and undersells the competition. And how do capitalists seek such control over labor? They divide and conquer by creating structures of production and payment hierarchies, buttressed by educational tracking as well as age, racial, gender or nationality differences that pit worker against worker, preventing them from struggling together against their common exploitation.

Besides classic price competition, which assumes identical products and has often been rendered secondary, more common is product differentiation through which firms compete by offering, and intensively advertizing, marginally different products. Successful innovation and sales efforts can expand a firm's share of the more or less well defined market increasing revenue and profits. And how do capitalists achieve such innovation and creative market manipulation? Once again, they can do this only through control over their labor force. Divide and conquer is still the name of the game, pitting worker against worker is still the key. Workers are trained as engineers or designers, paid well and treated as creative thinkers. They do not compete with production line workers but with each other, whether the competitors are proposing model design changes or new advertising gimmicks. Here again, the firm which is able to get the most work and cooperation out of its labor force wins the competitive battle. Behind success in intercorporate competition lies success in manipulating workers.

In both these cases, classic in economic theory, it becomes obvious that "competition" is merely the form through which the class struggle between labor and capital is organized. If we move from competitive markets to oligopolistic or monopolistic ones, or from the single product firm to the conglomerate or multinational corporation the dynamic is essentially the same, only the form changes. If we move from the shop floor to the wider society,

into the schools where they encarcerate our kids, onto the "playing" fields where the name of the game is winning at any price, into the streets where its supposed to be dog eat dog to survive or into our homes where we have to overcome our own competitive mindsets to achieve any real bonding, we discover that the ideologs are right -- competition is a social paradigm through which we are divided and all too often conquered.

Nor is this just a peculiar characteristic of "Western" capitalist society. Indeed, as Lenin well knew when he called for the organization of "socialist competition" in Russia, as Stalin understood when he hailed Stakonovism as the perfect form of socialist labor, and as Mao knew as he sought to manage "contradictions among the people," the dynamic we are discussing is by no means limited to Western capitalist economies but can be found in so-called socialist economies as well. As Margaret Thatcher, Mikail Gorbachev or Deng Chow Ping will testify, the continued existence of "uncompetitive" firms occurs only when the workers have the power to prevent their dissolution. Privatization in Britain and peristroika in China and the USSR have all been aimed at just such "uncompetitive" and "inefficient" bastions of workers' power.

Today it is easy to see why the spokespersons and policy makers of Western capitalist and Eastern socialist states seek to obfuscate these matters by hiding their attacks on their working classes behind the veil of "competition." In the United States, a decade of economists and businessmen crying "international competitiveness," to justify wage cuts, industrial reorganization, union busting, deregulation, and more work has been teaching American workers what competition is all about. In Western Europe, the forthcoming final unification of the Common Market in 1992 is teaching Northern European workers the true meaning of competition as they observe their corporate bosses drooling over the coming opportunities to pit cheaper, longer working Southern European labor against them.

The Left needs to take to heart, in its theory and its politics, the lesson American and European workers are learning the hard way: "competition" is at the heart of capitalism only in the sense that the control over workers constitutes the essence of the antagonistic capitalist-labor relation that constitutes this kind of society. Successful competition today means increased divisions among workers. It means heightened sexism, racism, and jingoistic nationalism. It means more prisons for workers who won't compete and concentration camps for refugees and undocumented multinational workers. It means fear and hatred of those with AIDS and of those who might have AIDS. It means longer school years, more bullshit courses and intensified discipline in the name of higher productivity and competing with the Japanese.

The Left must work to demystify the discourse of "competition" and "international competitiveness" and to point out the obvious: the only way for American and European workers to beat the divide and conquer strategy rationalized by these euphemisms is for them to provide support for their weaker, less well paid, longer working counterparts both at home and in Southern Europe, East Asia and the Third World. European workers see the danger of runaway shops and free labor mobility very clearly and are sensibly beginning to talk about minimum standards on wages, work rules and other working conditions throughout the Common Market. In one of his few lucid moments, George Meany once said the only way to beat runaway shops was to force the creation of a global minimum wage. True then, true now, at least in essence. For years, a thread of this insight has run through the work of the International Labor Organization which has repeatedly and futilely discussed international labor standards. The only way such standards will ever be enacted is for workers to force their governments to agree to it. The only way they will ever be able to do that on a large enough scale for such standards to be effective will be to organize internationally.

In better times, when accumulation rolls along and international competition is less intense, the need for such international organization is less obvious and appears as less urgent and more abstract. But today, with heighthened competition at the heart of current capitalist strategy for global restructuring, capital itself is teaching workers what they have to do. We need only articulate the lesson in organizational terms.

If we understand the current long term structural crisis of the system as a product of an international cycle of worker/student/peasant/women's struggles that began in the late 1960s and ruptured accumulation, then we can recognize that capital's competitive strategy was forced to be global as well as national and industrial. The problem now is that capital has achieved a degree of planned coherence in its counterattack that has outstripped the organizational capacity of that cycle of struggle to which it was the response.

However, the situation is still in flux, the crisis persists because capital has not yet achieved the degree of restructuring of productive and reproductive relations necessary to launch a new wave of accumulation. No definitive



new organization of production has been generalized. Reagan's "social agenda" collapsed and the crises of the schools, of the family, of sexual/gender relations all remain chronic and unable to provide a dependable basis for accumulation. Globally no reliable new international division of labor power has been achieved. From Central America and Southern Africa through the Mediterranean Basin and Eastern Europe to Asia the instability, rather than the manageability, of class relations rules. In retrospect we can see that the major successes of American imperialism in the Post-WWII period involved the temporary stabilization of a few pools of brutalized cheap labor --in countries such as Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Brazil-- which has helped make possible what real accumulation does go on today. (We must not consider the kind of redistributive, speculative financial games Reaganomics has fostered as real accumulation.) But even these workhouses of capitalist stability are today being torn by labor unrest and challenges to the existing order.

In these circumstances, we have an opportunity not only to articulate the organizational imperatives to deal with capitalist strategies of competition but also to counterpose alternative visions. Against capital's slogan of *competition*, we can respond with that of *cooperation* --in production, in overcoming capital's destruction of the environment, in international relations, in learning, in building better human relations. Today alternatives in each of these areas are no longer abstractions. Along with continuing debate about the quality of work, industrial workers in Europe have been able to keep the issue of work reduction on the negotiating agenda. Greens across the world have already forced capital, albeit in its own, distorted way, to cooperate internationally on issues of ozone depletion and, little by little, ocean pollution and deforestation. Despite Reagan and Ollie North's best efforts, joint resistance and cooperation between people in the United States and those in Central America has brought a virtual halt to US military intervention in Nicaragua and slowed it elsewhere. Across the world in recent years, students have once again taken to the streets and occupied buildings successfully challenging the state --from China, to Paris, to Madrid, to Mexico City to Howard University and the whole anti-apartheid movement in the US. Against the corporate exploitation of black labor in South Africa, students have built scholarship funds to build non-competitive human ties. Despite the Right Wing terror campaign to force women back into the bedroom, and gays out of it, the struggle for women's rights (especially for abortion) and the struggle against the state tolerated AIDS epidemic has solidified new forms of cooperation and preserved our terrain to explore new, non-competitive forms of personal relationships.

In short, to build on our experiences of struggles against being pitted against each other and of elaborating our own projects of collective self-valorization, we need first to recognize those experiences for what they have been, second to see their relevance to the current stage of the crisis and third to work on finding new organizational mechanisms for developing them. I assume that those directly involved in the various struggles are doing just that. The broader problem, as always, requires a fourth step: to make connections across struggles --especially internationally-- that can mutually reinforce them and speed the circulation of their power from one to another. Rather than giving in to demands for "increased competitiveness," we should begin to discuss how this can be done.

